

## Pronunciation Tactics in an EFL Setting

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In the field of EFL, both the necessity for and methods of teaching pronunciation have become controversial topics. Many L2 educators have varied opinions on the importance of including pronunciation practice in their lesson plans. Classroom activities, many teachers feel, should cater to what their students consider most important to their own personal goals or reasons for learning the language. For example, students may wish to build their vocabulary skills or strengthen their test taking skills in English. Regardless of current trends or what students may feel their selected needs are, teaching pronunciation is often considered essential in an ESL class where survival skills are imperative to the students' daily lives. In an ESL setting, the students must not only increase their English comprehension for the classroom, but also need to communicate and interact in English outside of the class in various situations. Students need to understand and be understood. If they can not hear English well, they are cut off from the language except in printed form. If they can not be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers (Gilbert 1984, 1). The question is what place, if any, does pronunciation have in an EFL setting?

The reasons are quite clear why survival skills can play a much less important role in an EFL setting, especially in such a homogeneous atmosphere as the FE classes at Asia University. English is not necessary for students to communicate with each other. English is not often used to make friends or to be understood outside of the classroom. Therefore, it would be easy for the teacher to neglect implementing pronunciation tasks in their lessons because they feel there is little or no need for the students to work on that aspect of the language. This attitude denies the students the opportunity to gain a precise command of the English language, hence the students' chance to decisively learn English as a whole language is hindered.

The process of learning a language is interconnective. This means each area of the language that is being taught helps improve every aspect of the language. Pronunciation and listening comprehension are linked together by a unified system within which individual sounds are systematically related. Students need this system in order to make sense of the separate pieces (Gilbert 1984, 1). If the students' English pronunciation skills are improved, clearly their listening skills and speaking skills become more refined. Spelling ability is also improved when the knowledge of English pronunciation has been increased.

A stronger comprehension of English pronunciation will greatly help students who plan to take the TOEFL or TOEIC because both tests have a listening section which is roughly one third of the overall score. Many students are so worried about improving their test taking skills they are reluctant to spend any time on improving their pronunciation. It is

difficult for some students to comprehend how pronunciation practice will help increase their score on an English proficiency examination. The student should be assured that the enhancement of their English pronunciation skills will, in turn, improve their TOEIC or TOEFL score. This is a reasonable promise since the ability to hear English more clearly and thereby recognize focus words is fundamentally related to better language comprehension, spoken or written (Gilbert 1984, 2,3).

Pronunciation practice is especially important for the students who plan to study abroad or are currently living abroad. When students are studying in an English-speaking environment, constant exposure to English affects their pronunciation skills as well as their ability to discern correct pronunciation in other speakers. With greater access to English-speaking radio, television, and everyday conversations in the street, the student has more opportunity to train their ear to listen for areas of English pronunciation that they are having difficulties with. If the student is not living in an English-speaking environment, there are fewer opportunities to hear or practice English.

Although terms of residency in an English-speaking environment can be a tremendous advantage, it does not guarantee improvement. Students' personal attitude and self-esteem is a major factor in improving English pronunciation. Many students who live abroad can either isolate themselves or surround themselves with people who speak the same language. It is not merely exposure that matters, but how the learner responds to the opportunities of listening to English spoken by a native speaker or by speaking English themselves (Kenworthy 1986, 6). Teaching English pronunciation before students study abroad gives them a head start. Increasing the students' pronunciation skills beforehand can build confidence and make them feel less reluctant to venture out and speak English when they go to study in another country. With this in mind, pronunciation is essential to the pre-AUAP student at Asia University.

The first procedure in teaching English pronunciation is to identify the areas of difficulty students have with pronouncing the English language. If the class consists of students with the same L1, this procedure can be much simpler since the same linguistic backgrounds usually share similar problems. Although this is often the case, many teachers assume that in a homogeneous classroom setting, all of the students will be at the same pronunciation skill level and have the same pronunciation problems. This is rarely the case. In many cases, even though all the students have the same mother tongue, a variety of different problems can arise.

Some learners have few pronunciation problems, others have a great many. Some individuals progress well, whereas other students seem to have great difficulty responding to the simplest English pronunciation challenge. Some learners can make a sound perfectly, and in the next instant their progress deteriorates. Due to personality-type and degree of shyness, some students have great difficulty with voice level and aspiration. Therefore, it is best to know what struggles individual students have with English pronunciation before dealing with the class as a whole.

Knowing the level of competency of each student's English pronunciation skills before beginning any classroom pronunciation tasks is very helpful. Using one of a range of standard pronunciation tests is an effective way of ascertaining students' problems. There are a variety of different tests in the commercial textbook market that can be used. In Harriette Gordon Gates' textbook *English Pronunciation for Japanese Students*, the diagnostic test is a list of similar-sounding words in columns for the student to read to the teacher. It is suggested that each student be tested individually. When the student pronounces the column correctly, the teacher puts a mark next to the column. The test can be repeatedly given throughout the course as a way to register the students' progress (Gates 1974, V,VI).

Another way to register the students' English pronunciation ability is through one-on-one interviews. This is very useful in identifying the students' vowel, consonant, aspiration and stress pattern problems without the chance of test anxiety impeding the students' performance. The interview should consist of simple questions which the students can easily answer, and also a range of vowels, consonants, consonant clusters and diphthongs which the teacher can select from to test the student. The students' pronunciation errors can be noted during the interview. In the English language, there are 46 different speech sounds, 21 vowel sounds and diphthongs and 25 consonants (Wijk 1966, 13); consequently, checking all the sounds may be a lengthy and arduous task.

The most effective way to help students overcome potential pronunciation problems is including pronunciation drills in the lesson plans and correcting students' pronunciation in the course of the lesson. The drills should be both intense and fast paced.

The best method of teaching pronunciation in drill form is to show two lists of minimal pair words to the students. Minimal pair words are similar-sounding words, such as glass and grass, elect and erect. Through verbal explanation and illustrations, the teacher should show how the mouth, tongue and throat should be positioned to form these sounds. After the list of words has been read by the teacher several times, students should take turns reading the words out loud. The teacher should remind the students to speak loudly and clearly, and correct the students when they make errors.

After the students have had a chance to practice the list of words, sentences with the same vowel or consonant structures are then given. The students should take turns repeating the sentences out loud. The instructor should correct their errors and assess student progress. Learners find it difficult to assess their own progress so the teacher must provide the learner with this information. Data about the students' progress and pointing out their improvements is a crucial factor in reinforcing student confidence and maintaining motivation. Joanne Kenworthy, author of *Teaching English Pronunciation*, wrote that even though learners will be aware of some of the features of their pronunciation that are different, they will not be able to tell if this is important or not (Kenworthy 1986, 2). The instructor should try not to overcorrect students.

Teaching pronunciation at times can be very rewarding, but progress may not be immediately apparent. Students' progress will vary in the classroom. Ultimately, success

in pronunciation will depend on how much effort the learner puts into it. The learner must be willing to take responsibility for his or her own learning. The teacher may be highly skilled at noticing mispronunciations and pointing them out, but if the learner takes no action in trying to monitor their own efforts, then the prospects of change or improvement are minimal. The learner needs to respond (Kenworthy 1986 2-3).

Students can be motivated in the following ways: persuade learners of the importance of good pronunciation for ease of communication. It is imperative for the teacher to emphasize that a native-like accent is not the imposed goal. Intelligibility and communicative efficiency are the only realistic goals. The great majority of learners will have a very practical purpose for learning English and will derive no particular benefit from acquiring a native-like pronunciation. While native-like pronunciation may be a goal for particular learners and while teachers should never actively discourage learners from setting themselves high goals, for the majority of learners, a more reasonable goal is to be intelligible to others (Kenworth 1986, 9).

Pronunciation improvement takes much practice. For the students to improve their pronunciation, they have to learn to articulate all over again. This can be a lengthy process which sometimes yields minimal results. Students can often become frustrated with their lack of progress. The teacher should demonstrate concern for the learners' pronunciation and their progress in it (Kenworth 1986 9). Reminding them that learning how to articulate in another language takes time gives the students necessary reinforcement. Explaining to students that since they have trained their mouth, tongue and throat to make sounds a certain way their whole lives, suddenly being asked to create sounds a whole new way is something that cannot be mastered in one lesson.

At first it is difficult for students to even hear the differences in sounds. Great progress has been made when the students begin to distinguish unfamiliar sounds. Also, students often cannot tell if they are pronouncing a word correctly; the teacher needs to provide them with information about their performance ( Kenworthy 1986, 2).

Minimal pair drills should not be the only lesson for a 90 minute class. This would be too overwhelming for both instructor and student. Pronunciation is a great way to break up the daily routine of a class. Both the instructor and the students, whether the class is a beginning or advanced level, will find the use of pronunciation drills in the classroom not only valuable, but also a great change of pace.

## References

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